

**Tripartite Caribbean Symposium on  
“Tripartism and Social Dialogue: Comparative Experiences  
in Dealing with Economic and Social Development Issues”  
(Barbados, 17 – 18 May 2011)**

**CONCEPT NOTE**

**Social Dialogue and Decent Work**

1. Social dialogue is defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) to include all types of negotiation, consultation or exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy. It can exist as a tripartite process, with the government as an official party to the dialogue or as bipartite relations between labour and management (or trade unions and employers' organizations), with or without indirect government involvement. Social dialogue processes can be institutionalised or informal, and can take place at the national, regional or at enterprise level. It can also be inter-professional, sectoral or a combination of all of these.<sup>1</sup>
2. The primary objective of social dialogue is to promote consensus building and democratic involvement among the main stakeholders in the world of work. Successful social dialogue structures and processes have the potential to resolve important economic and social issues, encourage good governance, advance social and industrial peace and stability and boost economic progress.<sup>2</sup>
3. Social dialogue is intricately linked to the Decent Work Agenda. The Decent Work concept was formulated in 1999 by the ILO's tripartite constituents – representatives of governments, employers and workers. The Decent Work concept is based on four pillars, namely: guaranteeing rights at work; creating opportunities to secure decent employment; enhancing social protection; and promoting tripartism and social dialogue. In a relatively short time, the Decent Work concept has forged international consensus among governments, employers, workers and civil society that productive employment and Decent Work are key elements to achieving fair globalization, reducing poverty and achieving equitable, inclusive and sustainable development.<sup>3</sup> This has been confirmed in many instances (e.g. at the UN World Summit of Heads of States and Governments in 2005, 4<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Americas in 2005, CARICOM COHSOD Meetings in 2006 and 2010, Declarations of the G8 and the G20 Summits in 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/themes/sd.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/themes/sd.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/decent-work-agenda/lang--en/index.htm>

4. Globally, more than 120 ILO member states have concluded or are in the process of completing a Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP),<sup>4</sup> and in this respect, many countries have identified 'tripartism and social dialogue' as one of the priorities of their national programme. For instance, in the Caribbean, eight countries to date have signed on a DWCP (The Bahamas, Belize, all six OECS countries as well as Montserrat), and all have outcomes which focus on strengthening of the tripartite constituents as well as the institutions, processes and scope of social dialogue.

### **Social Dialogue in practice**

5. Throughout the Caribbean, the principle of tripartism and social dialogue is widely accepted. However, while the Caribbean is known for having relatively good records, as evidenced by the reports of the ILO's supervisory bodies, the implementation of social dialogue at the tripartite and bipartite levels can be tempered by few challenges. In situations where the challenge is of a political nature, constituents may require extended time to work out the best possible solutions. In other cases, consultations may be held at irregular intervals; collective negotiations may be untenable; solutions agreed to, may encounter obstacles at the implementation phase; or disputes at the enterprise level may gain ascent into the national arena.
6. Challenges of the aforementioned nature are not confined to a particular region. Many countries, including those in the Caribbean, have developed solutions to mitigate these challenges across and within their economic and social sectors. The Social Partnership model in Barbados is often looked at as an example and serves as good practice and a reference case inside and outside of the Caribbean; its success is largely due to a commitment to formulate a united response to the country's socio-economic challenges, and a non-adversarial approach among the social partners, based on trust and mutual respect.<sup>5</sup> Many countries in the Caribbean referred to national social dialogue in their quest to find sustainable solutions to the recent global financial and economic crisis. For instance, the Government of The Bahamas consulted with the social partners and agreed to undertake major reform of its social security system by introducing a new unemployment benefit scheme. The ILO supported these developments, *inter alia*, with a subregional high-level tripartite Conference in Kingston, Jamaica, in April 2009, to discuss the social and labour consequences of the crisis and to seek sustainable solutions through social dialogue.
7. It has been posited that for social dialogue to work, the State should play an active role in the process, whether it is, or is not, a protagonist. The State is responsible for creating a stable political and civil climate in which employers' and workers' organizations can operate. Its responsibility also includes support for the process through the establishment of the legal, institutional and other frameworks that enable the parties to engage effectively.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ILO Report GB.309/TC/2 (Governing Body, 309<sup>th</sup> Session, Geneva, November 2010) states that 50 DWCP have been in effect in August 2010, and over 70 in various stages of development (draft form, ongoing negotiations, expired and re-negotiated).

<sup>5</sup> For more details of the Social Partnership in Barbados, please refer to <http://labour.gov.bb/social-partnership>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/themes/sd.htm>



8. For successful social dialogue to take place, the following factors should form an integral part of the process:
- Strong, independent workers' and employers' organizations with the technical capacity and the access to relevant information to participate in social dialogue;
  - Political will and commitment to engage in social dialogue by all the parties;
  - Respect for the fundamental rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining; and
  - Appropriate institutional support.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Social dialogue at the national level**

9. Social dialogue at the national level is usually embedded in formal tripartite institutions, supported by the labour administration system. Examples within the Caribbean can be found in The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Grenada, Guyana and Suriname, among others. At this level, the Government plays the role of a facilitator and involves, in a structured and transparent way, the social partners and other pertinent actors in policy-making. It can create the opportunity for non-governmental actors to express concerns and interests in a formal institution. This exemplifies participatory governance and demonstrates a high degree of democratization.
10. Addressing economic and social issues through tripartite consultations can result in significant contributions to national development. The involvement of the tripartite actors in the design and development of national development plans and their implementation, as often practised in the Caribbean countries, allows Government to obtain relevant advice from (expert) organizations, which aids in their decision-making process. It also increases the ownership of decisions taken. While social dialogue is sometimes revitalized during times of crisis, it has proven invaluable when practiced on an ongoing basis. An advanced form of social dialogue at the national level can result in very concrete and detailed agreements, sometimes signed in a National Pact or Social Protocol. A notable example is the Social Partnership in Barbados, established in 1993, which signed its 6<sup>th</sup> multi-year Protocol in May 2011.

#### **Social dialogue at the enterprise level**

11. Social dialogue at the enterprise level occurs where management and workers communicate with each other and seek to find mutually acceptable solutions to problems in the workplace. This can take place when management communicates with elected trade union leaders; or at the workplace level when shop stewards are in direct contact with supervisors and middle management, on behalf of the group of workers that they represent. Technical committees (such as a Joint Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) committee at the enterprise level) are institutionalized forms of ongoing bilateral or bipartite social dialogue. Larger enterprises may have more than one committee, or may meet at different levels to discuss a broader range of relevant matters. To ensure that the process of dialogue is sustainable, administrative arrangements need to be put in place.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/themes/sd.htm>

12. A more elaborate form of social dialogue at the enterprise level occurs with the negotiation of a Collective Agreement. While some agreements cover fundamental areas, such as wages and salaries, working hours and leave periods, other collective agreements also address areas pertaining to sponsored training opportunities; family and other allowances; social security packages; working time accounts; canteen and child care issues.
13. Further areas that can be addressed through social dialogue at the enterprise level comprise company restructuring, introduction of new technologies, conciliatory procedures prior to traditional grievance procedures or any other subject that the parties elect to address and which can lead to a creative win-win situation. Typically, such issues are first explored outside the formal setting of negotiations for collective agreements. Ongoing social dialogue helps to create a positive climate, build mutual trust and prepares the ground for successful collective bargaining. Ultimately, this will enhance the motivation of workers and can lead to considerable improvement in productivity levels of the company.

#### **Social dialogue on regional issues**

14. The Caribbean Community recognizes social dialogue and tripartism as powerful tools for addressing issues of regional import. This is evidenced by the adoption of the CARICOM Declaration of Labour and Industrial Relations Principles in 1995 and the CARICOM Charter of Civil Society in 1997. This Charter provides for, inter alia, a role for the social partners in decision-making processes and constitutes one of the foundations for participatory democracy. For instance, the implications of increased movement of persons, migrant workers, businesses and services, have repercussions at all levels of society – this is the case for the Caribbean as much as it is for other regions of the world. Governments have the responsibility to establish an adequate framework; business and labour have to adapt to new situations which affect the sustainability of enterprises and the employment of workers. Social dialogue is an excellent tool to address new challenges that emerge in a regional or subregional context - be it in CARICOM institutions or at the OECS level, for policy-making or to strengthen Government's position in dealings with regional or international organizations (e.g. the European Union, the United Nations or the World Bank).
15. Social partners can and do elaborate positions on issues that need to be addressed at the regional level. The social partners must continue to work through and increase the effectiveness of their regional umbrella organizations, to be able to effectively influence regional policies and decisions.
16. Regional integration policies also help to determine enterprise-level consultations, whereby they could influence company policy or its strategic objectives with respect to future activities and directions. In such cases, social dialogue can be the tool for achieving congruence between policies at both regional and enterprise levels. Social dialogue is an essential process for ensuring a smooth transition where adjustments become necessary and is usually beneficial to both employers and workers.



## **Social dialogue and international trade agreements**

17. At regular intervals, the Caribbean, as a regional economic bloc negotiates trade and investment agreements with external partners. The most recent examples are the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiations with the European Union, concluded in 2008, and the ongoing trade negotiations with Canada. These agreements regulating trade have a great impact on the world of work, as they affect employment in quantitative terms, the quality of jobs and opportunities for creating sustainable enterprises. This fact legitimizes the call for social partners to be able to influence trade negotiations to ensure that Decent Work is adequately addressed.
18. Since the 2006 Tripartite Caribbean Employment Forum, the ILO has held several events for employers and workers with the participation of government representatives that addressed international trade agreements. Constituents were informed on content, processes and procedures of past, ongoing and future negotiations of international trade and investment agreements. In line with requests expressed, two guides were developed on the CARIFORUM – European Community Economic Partnership Agreement.<sup>8</sup> The social partners concluded that it was advisable to find common positions with regard to priorities in order to inform and strengthen Government's position during the negotiations of such agreements. In this context, the social partners called for closer collaboration between governments and themselves before, during, and after the actual international trade negotiations.

## **Labour Market Information Systems**

19. The symposium will also offer an opportunity to inform the participants about a new tool that the ILO has developed to strengthen the Labour Market Information Systems (LMIS) in the members of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). This information system will establish a set of key labour and employment statistics and standardize computer-aided record keeping, making the relevant data available for economic and social analysis, policy-making, monitoring and assessing progress. It can thus provide the basis for informed social dialogue concerning national development. The Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is the first member in the OECS to have introduced the new system, which was officially launched in April 2011. Technical and financial support for the project is being provided by the ILO Office for the Caribbean and the Caribbean Centre for Development Administration (CARICAD).

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<sup>8</sup> CARIFORUM comprises Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.